



**STATE OF WASHINGTON**  
**OFFICE OF THE FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S OMBUDSMAN**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Ombudsman releases annual report to Governor and Legislature with recommendations to reduce child fatalities and address shortcomings in the child protection system.**

**TUKWILA, May 30, 2006** – The Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman (OFCO) issued its annual report today, which recommends changes in state laws and policies to reduce child fatalities and improve child protection in Washington State. The recommendations are based on the Ombudsman's work over a two-year period, from 2004 to 2005.

In 2004, 87 children died who were either in the care of DSHS Children's Administration, or who had received services from the agency in the year preceding their death. The Ombudsman presents data on these deaths as well as in-depth findings and recommendations from its review of the high profile fatalities of 16 month-old Justice and six-week-old Raiden Robinson, and 4 year-old Sirita Sotelo.

OFCO Director, Mary Meinig, stated, "Tragically, child fatalities continue to demand a significant part of our focus. We continue to have grave concerns that the recommendations that arise from these and other fatality reviews are not being sufficiently and consistently implemented. These recommendations, such as completing CPS investigations on a timely basis, conducting regular health and safety checks of children, and reducing caseload, could be life saving."

The Ombudsman's report calls for reductions in caseloads of social workers and supervisors; a greater opportunity for relative and foster care providers to have a voice in the court process; and for relatives to be allowed to maintain contact with children even after Child Protective Services has intervened to place them out of the home.

Strong concerns were expressed by the Ombudsman that there is inadequate recruitment, licensure, and retention of foster homes. Ms. Meinig stated, "There is a critical shortage of foster homes for children throughout the state. This crisis needs to be recognized and prioritized."

The Ombudsman also noted the importance of providing parents and children maximum contact with each other, consistent with the law. “A shortage of resources within DSHS cannot be an excuse for not permitting parents and children to see each other on a regular basis. Not only is it important to bonding and attachment, but it motivates parents to comply with necessary services,” stated Ms. Meinig.

The report presented a final area of concern, which is the removal of children from long term pre-adoptive placements. According to Ms. Meinig, “There are some competing interests within the law as to placement preferences for dependent children. The legislature needs to re-examine these laws so that long term stable, healthy placements are not disrupted and relatives are identified earlier in the process to determine if they would be suitable care providers for these children.”

Contact: OFCO’s annual report may be obtained by contacting OFCO at 800-571-7321 or by accessing OFCO’s web page at <http://www.governor.wa.gov/ofco>.

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